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ABSTRACT

A somatic approach to education implies education that trusts individuals to learn from and listen to the information they are receiving from the interaction of self with the environment. Somatic or embodied knowing is experiential knowledge that involves senses, perceptions, and mind-body action and reaction. Western culture has been dominated by the separation of cognitive knowledge from embodied knowledge and the distrust of bodily knowing. Recent developments in mind-body research and feminist and postmodernist discourse have turned adult educators' attention to somatic learning. Issues arising from the somatic approach to adult education include the following: (1) recognition of the body as a source of knowledge; (2) empowerment/resistance to dominant culture; and (3) a means of developing empathy and respecting diversity. Two paths for adult education have been identified. The first is the embodied way, in which a more holistic approach to curriculum development, teaching, learning, and research brings the body back into educational theory and practice. The second is the Body Project, which recognizes the body's place in the classroom and the ways in which classrooms, teachers, learners, and institutions construct the body as gendered, raced, diseased, disabled, and sexually oriented. (An annotated list of 27 resources constitutes approximately 80% of this document.) (MN)

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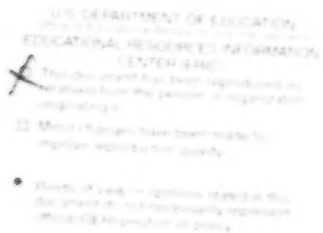

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TRENDS AND ISSUES ALERT NO. 32

Somatic/Embodied Learning and Adult Education

by Sandra Kerka
2002

"A somatic approach to education integrates, as an existential whole, the experiential history of individuals with their current experience. It implies an education that trusts individuals to learn from their ability to attend and to listen to the information they are receiving from the interaction of self with the environment" (Sellers-Young 1998, p. 176). Somatic or embodied knowing is experiential knowledge that involves senses, perception, and mind/body action and reaction (Matthews 1998). Western culture has been dominated by the separation of cognitive knowledge from embodied knowledge and the distrust and denigration of bodily knowing (Simon 1998). More recently, developments in mind/body research (Weiss 2001) and feminist and postmodernist discourse (Davis 1997; Green 2000) have turned the attention of adult educators to somatic learning.

Education has traditionally emphasized linguistic, aural, and visual learning (Sellers-Young 1998), and physicality has been viewed as something that must be tamed or controlled to achieve cognitive performance (Stinson 1995). However, evidence of the contextual and situated nature of learning and the value of tacit knowledge (Durrance 1998; Simon 1998) points to the importance of an approach that respects the whole of the sentient, embodied learner (Matthews 1998). Issues arising from this somatic approach include the following: (1) *recognition of the body as a source of knowledge*—learners become adept at exposing the process of constructing knowledge and (de)legitimizing knowledge claims (Gustafson 1999); (2) *empowerment/resistance to dominant culture*—awareness of bodily experience disengages learners from "the apprenticeship of observation" (Fortin 1998, p. 52) and prepares them to question the primacy of dominant knowledge sources (ibid.); and (3) *a means of developing empathy and respecting diversity*—Barlas (2001), Gustafson (1999), and Todd (2001) suggest that awareness of and respect for our own somatic responses and the sharing of insights about embodied experiences open us to alternative perspectives.

Chapman (1998) identifies two paths for adult educators: the Embodied Way, in which a more holistic approach to curriculum design, teaching, learning, and research brings the body back into educational theory and practice; and the Body Project, recognizing the body's place in the classroom as well as the ways in which classrooms, teachers, learners, and institutions construct the body as gendered, raced, diseased, disabled, and sexually oriented. The following resources provide insights from sociology, dance, nursing, and adult education for using somatic approaches to learning.

Resources

Barlas, C. "Learning-within-Relationship as Context and Process in Adult Education." In ***42nd Annual Adult Education Research Conference Proceedings, East Lansing, Michigan, June 1-3, 2001***, edited by R. O. Smith et al. East Lansing: Michigan State University, 2001. <http://www.edst.educ.ubc.ca/aerc/2001/2001barlas.htm>
Participating in a learning environment into which the diversity of the whole self was invited provided the learners with the experience of inclusivity. Whole-person learning experiences (imaginal, somatic, affective, intellectual) contributed to learners' capacities to include the whole personhood of the individual.

Beaudoin, C. "Integrating Somatic Learning into Everyday Life." ***Canadian Journal of Education*** 24, no. 1 (1999): 76-80.
A study of six adults who had experience with body-centered approaches to somatic education shows how subjects use their somatic learning in everyday situations of distress, particularly when they are suffering from emotional discomfort.

Beckett, D., and Morris, G. "Ontological Performance: Bodies, Identities and Learning." ***Studies in the Education of Adults*** 33, no. 1 (April 2001): 35-48.
Within the framework of the body as a significant site for learning, case studies are used to support the claim of ontological performance (practical embodied actions) as a way to approach adult learning for and at work.

Brockman, J. "A Somatic Epistemology for Education." ***Educational Forum*** 65, no. 4 (Summer 2001): 328-334.
Somatic knowing is a source of knowing more fundamental than culture and could help educators and philosophers in making moral distinctions.

Brooks, A., and Clark, C. "Narrative Dimensions of Transformative Learning." In ***42nd Annual Adult Education Research Conference Proceedings, East Lansing, Michigan, June 1-3, 2001***, edited by R. O. Smith et al. East Lansing: Michigan State University, 2001. <http://www.edst.educ.ubc.ca/aerc/2001/2001brooks.htm>
Narrative includes the cognitive, affective, spiritual, and somatic dimensions of personhood. Thus narrative offers a view of a self that is multiple and complex, dynamic and changing.

Chapman, V.-L. "Adult Education and the Body: Changing Performances of Teaching and Learning." In ***39th Annual Adult Education Research Conference Proceedings, San Antonio, Texas, May 15-16, 1998***, compiled by J. C. Kimmel. San Antonio, TX: University of the Incarnate Word; College Station: Texas A&M University, 1998. (ED 426 247) <http://www.edst.educ.ubc.ca/aerc/1998/98chapman.htm>
Discusses ways of working with the body in practice, theorizing, and research. Urges adult educators to become bodily conscious and, when encouraging learners to start with their own experiences, to embody what they preach.

Clark, M. C. "Off the Beaten Path: Some Creative Approaches to Adult Learning." ***New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education (The New Update on Adult Learning Theory)*** no. 89 (Spring 2001): 83-91.
Discusses the renewed recognition of the body as a source of knowledge and shows how somatic awareness offers creative alternatives for adult learning.

Crawford, L. A. "Including the Body in Learning Processes." In ***Proceedings of the 17th Annual Conference of the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education, Ottawa, Ontario, May 29-30, 1998***, edited by M. Taylor, pp. 57-60. Ottawa, Ontario: University of Ottawa, 1998.
Illustrates how body movement and art can be used in teaching and learning in adult education.

Crowdes, M. S. "Embodying Sociological Imagination: Pedagogical Support for Linking Bodies to Minds." ***Teaching Sociology*** 28, no. 1 (January 2000): 24-40.
Discusses how to enhance the teaching of critical social analysis at the college level with a focus on somatic and experiential learning modalities. Presents several exercises aimed at amplifying differences in thoughts, feelings, and somatic experiences.

Davis, K., ed. ***Embodied Practices: Feminist Perspectives on the Body***. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997.
Examines the role of the body as socially shaped and historically colonized territory and as the focus of individual women's struggles

for autonomy and self-determination, drawing on insights from contemporary feminist theories of gender and power.

Durrance, B. "Some Explicit Thoughts on Tacit Learning." ***Training and Development*** 52, no. 12 (December 1998): 24-29.
Discusses tacit learning, the bringing together of mind and body by practice, and how to incorporate it into training. Includes descriptions of exercises that reveal tacit knowledge.

Egan, K. ***The Educated Mind: How Cognitive Tools Shape Our Understanding.*** Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.
Identifies somatic understanding as one of five kinds of understanding resulting from the development of particular intelligence tools that individuals acquire from society.

Fortin, S. "Somatics: A Tool for Empowering Modern Dance Teachers." In ***Dance, Power, and Difference: Critical and Feminist Perspectives on Dance Education***, edited by S. B. Shapiro, pp. 49-74. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1998.
Case studies of three teachers explain how, through somatic studies, they began to question their role as teachers and build an environment that empowers teachers and students.

Game, A. "Sociology's Emotions." ***Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*** 34, no. 4 (November 1997): 385-399.
Examines the place of emotion in knowledge and the ways in which a consideration of emotion contributes to an understanding of embodied knowledge practices.

Green, J. "Social Somatic Theory, Practice, and Research: An Inclusive Approach in Higher Education Dance." In ***Dancing in the Millennium Conference Proceedings***, comp. by J. Crone-Willis and J. LaPointe-Crump, pp. 213-217. Congress on Research in Dance, Dance Critics Association, National Dance Association, Society of Dance History Scholars, 2000.
Bodily experience is not neutral or value free; it is shaped by backgrounds, experiences, and sociocultural habits. It is necessary to study the sociocultural effects on the body as well as how bodies work in practice.

Gustafson, D. L. "Embodied Learning: The Body as an Epistemological Site." In ***Meeting the Challenge: Innovative Feminist Pedagogies in Action***, edited by M. Mayberry and E. C. Rose, pp. 249-274. New York: Routledge, 1999.
Experiences of learning in nonstandard classrooms led to a view of the body as both content and pedagogy. Five educational outcomes consistent with feminist pedagogy derive from this foundation of embodied learning.

Heshusius, L., and Ballard, K., eds. ***From Positivism to Interpretivism and Beyond: Tales of Transformation in Educational and Social Research (The Mind-Body Connection).*** New York: Teachers College Press, 1996.
Papers discuss ways of knowing that enable the discovery of meanings that are not adequately captured by positivist, reductionist, or mechanistic methods but are found through the wisdom of the body.

Matthews, J. C. "Somatic Knowing and Education." ***Educational Forum*** 62, no. 3 (Spring 1998): 236-242.
Somatic knowing is as central to daily competence as analytically discursive, distanced knowing. An embodied education grounded in somatics is holistic and values areas typically neglected or trivialized in education, such as the arts.

Michelson, E. "Re-membering: The Return of the Body to Experiential Learning." ***Studies in Continuing Education*** 20, no. 2 (November 1998): 217-233.
The disconnection between mind and body that characterizes Western thought rejects the experiences of the body as a part of experiential learning. Because experience is located in the body, experiential learning is better understood as a process of "re-membering."

Pepa, C. A., and Russell, C. A. "Introducing Complementary/Alternative Strategies in a Baccalaureate Curriculum." ***Nursing and Health Care Perspectives*** 21, no. 3 (May-June 2000): 127-129.
An undergraduate nursing course explored healing strategies based on mind-body-spirit connections. It offered learners opportunities to explore personal experiences and beliefs about health, healing, and culture.

Prichard, C. "Embodied Knowing, Knowledge Management and the Reconstruction of Post-compulsory Education." Paper presented at the Critical Management Studies Conference, University of Manchester, England, July 1999. <http://www.mngt.waikato.ac.nz/research/ejrot/cmsconference/papers_infoknow.htm>
If knowing is a human facility situated inside the bodies and minds of people, then the task of knowledge management becomes how to make this knowledge explicit, to reconstruct the learning process so that this valuable knowledge can be shared.

Schlattner, C. J. "The Body in Transformative Learning." In ***35th Annual Adult Education Research Conference Proceedings, Knoxville, Tennessee, May 1994***, edited by M. Hymans, J. Armstrong, and E. Anderson, pp. 324-329. Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1994. (ED 381 616)
Examines the implications of including the body in a theory of transformative learning. Explores how changes involved in perspective transformation occur and the contribution of the somatic aspect of learning to the transformative process.

Sellers-Young, B. "Somatic Processes: Convergence of Theory and Practice." ***Theatre Topics*** 8, no. 2 (September 1998): 173-187.
Somatic knowledge does not simply mean "knowledge of the body" but knowledge gained through the body. A somatic approach combines individuals' current and historical experience and offers a new way to view the self.

Simon, S. "Subjectivity and the Experiencing Body: Toward an Ecological Foundation for Adult Learning." Ed.D. dissertation, Portland State University, 1998.
When mindful attention to embodied experience is cultivated, new ways to consider learning, epistemology, and moral education become available that are more culturally and ecologically grounded.

Stinson, S. W. "Body of Knowledge." ***Educational Theory*** 45, no. 1 (Winter 1995): 43-54. <http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/EPS/Educational-Theory/Contents/1995_1.asp>
Explores how the embodied knowing perspective can inform educational research. Discusses the significance of physical sensation in the lived experience of research.

Todd, J. "Body Knowledge, Empathy, and the Body Politic." ***The Humanist*** 61, no. 2 (March-April 2001): 23-28.
The body is vital in the making of responsible ethical decisions, and responsibility is impossible without attention to somatic responses.

Weiss, R. P. "The Mind-Body Connection in Learning." ***T+D*** 55, no. 9 (September 2001): 61-67.
Discusses how humans learn and describes the workings of the human brain and the complex connection between the mind, the body, and learning performance.

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